Environmental groups should pool efforts to reach the public

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A lot of time, effort, and money are spent by agencies, municipalities, and other non-governmental organizations to inform and educate the public about environmental concerns. Could these groups collaborate to inform the public about an environmental concern even though their beliefs may be very different? Two studies suggest that they can and should.

University of Illinois professional geographer Bethany Cutts tracked messages to the public about water quality and usage from a variety of sources in Phoenix, Arizona. She found that considerable overlap in the messaging already existed, but there was little understanding or direction to collaborate and reach specific audiences, such as Spanish speakers in the community.

"When I began interviewing agencies in a fact-finding mission, I kept hearing the same things. They referenced each other, shared ideas, collaborated, and co-funded projects," Cutts said.

As the project progressed, Cutts determined that although the organizations' biggest strength seemed to be their connectivity and ability to share information, they haven't found a good way to manage and maximize the connections that already exist between specific groups within the public and the network of water educators.

"Everyone is trying to reach the entire public," Cutts said. "The really strong environmental groups are reaching people who already have a lot

of interest in environmental and ecological issues so they're not the [target audience](#)."

Cutts suggests that even though their goals may be different, there could be more information and even financial sharing between organizations. They can work together to build [public knowledge](#) and [empowerment](#) in [environmental decision](#) making. "Some of these organizations have dissolved due to [budget cuts](#)," she said. "I wanted to see if their cumulative effort stacked information higher in some neighborhoods while missing other neighborhoods completely or if information was more randomly or evenly distributed so that everyone got some sort of information."

Cutts found that generally the public she interviewed had more information if they had heard it from several sources. "I was interested in the total number of messages a person would pass in their daily life," she said. "Someone might see a billboard and later get information in their water bill, and their child might be in an after-school program where there are puppet shows about water conservation. So some neighborhoods might be barraged with a lot of messages, whereas other neighborhoods even within the same city, might not.

"Efficiency would improve if they could be more strategic about the ways they get information distributed," she said. "They need to recognize that they can all be moderately successful at reaching the public at large or they can collaborate to engage in experimentation and to reach audiences they may be missing, such as the Spanish-speaking community."

Cutts believes understanding existing connections and seizing strategic opportunities to form new ones could be an outcome from the findings of this research.

"As the budget-constrained groups reconfigure, they can plan to preserve what they like about the way they reach the public while building public capacity and public will to prioritize water usage."

More information: Participatory geographic information systems for the co-production of science and policy in an emerging boundary organization was published in *Environmental Science and Policy*.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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